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Boren predicts probe will not discredit CIA

By Bill Gertz
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Congressional investigators have found no evidence linking illicit support of the Nicaraguan rebels to the CIA, other than "isolated" agency operatives, the chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee said in an interview.

Sen. David L. Boren, Oklahoma Democrat, predicted in the interview that the CIA, faced with a new round of congressional restraints on its activities, will emerge undamaged from the storm of controversy that has enveloped the agency as a result of the Iran-Contra covert operation.

"While there are some isolated cases of individuals here or there involved — there's been absolutely no evidence of systematic, institutional involvement by the CIA," he said.

"I think when all the evidence is in, the CIA will not be damaged as an agency," said Mr. Boren, who sits on the Iran-Contra select committee.

Asked about morale among agency employees stung by criticism of the Iran-Contra operation, Mr. Boren said, "They're weathering it well."

Congressional hearings on the National Security Council-led covert program of selling arms to Iran and allegedly diverting proceeds to Nicaragua's anti-communist rebels are

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scheduled to resume Wednesday, after two weeks of testimony from several witnesses who touched on the CIA's role.

Retired Air Force Maj. Gen. Richard V. Secord testified that the CIA station chief in Costa Rica, identified in published reports as Thomas Castillo, possessed a code machine used in communicating with Marine Lt. Col. Oliver North, the dismissed National Security Council official who allegedly masterminded the Contra funding scheme.

Other witnesses have testified that Mr. Casey, who died earlier this month, was deeply involved in the operation through his contacts with

Col. North.

One administration intelligence official, who requested anonymity, said in addition to the Costa Rica station chief, two other CIA operatives in Central America are suspected of assisting the Contras at a time when U.S. aid was banned.

The operatives were identified as the CIA station chief in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, a second agency operative in Aguacate, Honduras, and Mr. Castillo. The New York Times reported yesterday that as many as five CIA agents have been linked to the operation.

The administration official said the CIA operatives were "recruited by Ollie North." They risked their careers, he said, because "they felt a moral obligation" to help the rebel army that was formed in a 1981 CIA paramilitary operation but was left without U.S. backing by a congressional aid cutoff passed in 1985.

The official stated "the agency is not guilty of institutional malfeasance" in the Iran-Contra affair.

As for Mr. Casey's role in the operation, "There's only one person who knows that, and he's not talking," the official said.

Mr. Boren said, based on evidence presented so far in the congressional investigation, Mr. Casey's participation appears limited to "individual involvement, such as using his political influence or connections."

Some intelligence officials privately have expressed concern that the Iran-Contra investigations will trigger a debilitating backlash against the CIA that could cripple the agency's ability to carry out covert and clandestine operations.

"Most people in the agency feel the Iran-Contra hearings will pass without the backlash of the Church era. Some feel that the attention focused on the agency is unwarranted, but generally morale is good."

A special Senate intelligence committee investigated the agency from 1975 to 1976 under the late Sen. Frank Church, Idaho Democrat. The probe led to restrictions on CIA covert activities through a congressional reporting process involving numerous committees and scores of staff members.

These restrictions were later loosened somewhat. Recently House

and Senate proposals have been introduced again calling for stricter covert action reporting, including one plan to allow the General Accounting Office, Congress' auditing arm, to probe CIA covert action accounts for the first time.

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